



## Fostering Cultural Awareness via English Movies

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### ABSTRACT

*In today's globalised world, intercultural awareness is essential for effective communication and mutual understanding. Language education extends beyond grammar and vocabulary to include cultural competence, which enables learners to navigate diverse social and cultural contexts. This study explores the role of English films as a pedagogical tool for fostering intercultural awareness among language learners. By exposing students to authentic cultural representations, films can enhance their ability to recognize, analyse, and appreciate cultural differences. The study employs a quantitative survey with university-level English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. A selected group of students engage with carefully chosen English-language films that depict various cultural perspectives. A questionnaire measures changes in students' intercultural sensitivity, while thematic analysis of questions provides insights into their perceptions of cultural diversity. Findings indicate that students exposed to English films demonstrate greater intercultural awareness, improved critical thinking regarding stereotypes, and increased motivation to explore other cultures. However, challenges such as difficulty in understanding cultural nuances and the influence of media portrayals on perceptions were also noted. The study concludes that integrating English films into language education is an effective strategy for developing intercultural competence. It recommends structured classroom discussions and guided analysis to maximise learning outcomes. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on intercultural communication in language learning, highlighting films as an engaging and impactful educational resource.*

**Key Words:** Cultural Diversity, Critical thinking, Intercultural Awareness, Intercultural Competence, ESL Learners, Film-based Learning, Media in language education.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, intercultural awareness has become a critical skill for effective communication. Language learning is no longer confined to mastering grammar and vocabulary; it also involves understanding the cultural contexts in which languages are used. Intercultural competence allows individuals to navigate diverse social interactions, appreciate different perspectives, and avoid misunderstandings arising from cultural differences (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2020). One of the most effective ways to enhance intercultural awareness in language classrooms is through the use of English films, which provide authentic representations of various cultural norms, values, and communication styles (Kramsch, 1993; Weninger & Kiss, 2013).

Films serve as a rich educational resource by exposing learners to different cultural settings, social interactions, and real-life conversations. Unlike traditional language textbooks, which often present simplified dialogues and cultural generalizations, films offer a more dynamic and immersive experience (Pegrum, 2008; Chao, 2013). They enable students to observe non-verbal cues, tone variations, and contextual expressions that are crucial for understanding cultural subtleties. Previous studies have shown that audiovisual materials significantly enhance learners' engagement, comprehension, and critical thinking regarding cultural differences (Borghetti, 2011; Herrero,

2019). However, despite these advantages, the extent to which films contribute to fostering intercultural awareness in language learners remains an area requiring further investigation (Liaw, 2006).

While English films have the potential to enhance intercultural understanding, there are challenges associated with their use in language education. Many learners may struggle to fully grasp cultural nuances, especially when encountering unfamiliar historical, social, or linguistic contexts (Baker, 2015; Seferoğlu, 2008). Additionally, films may sometimes reinforce stereotypes or provide skewed representations of certain cultures, which could influence learners' perceptions in unintended ways (Kuppens, 2010; Dervin, 2016). Therefore, there is a need for structured film-based learning strategies that help students critically analyse cultural portrayals and develop an informed perspective on intercultural interactions (Sercu, 2005; Porto, 2014).

This study explores how English films foster intercultural awareness among language learners. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Examine the extent to which English films influence students' intercultural awareness (e.g., understanding of cultural diversity, tolerance, respect)?
2. Explore how students perceive intercultural learning activities (discussions, oral commentary, assessments) linked to films in the English classroom?
3. Investigate the perceived usefulness of films in fostering intercultural competence?

By addressing these objectives, this research contributes to the growing field of intercultural education and highlights the potential of films as a meaningful resource for language educators seeking to develop their students' intercultural competence. Thus, this paper explores the role of English films in fostering intercultural awareness among language learners, analysing their impact on students' attitudes, perceptions, and cross-cultural understanding. This study focuses on the perspectives of Malaysian's public university students.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Films as a Tool for Cultural Learning and Intercultural Awareness**

Language and culture are inseparable, as Kramsch (1993) argued that authentic materials such as films offer a rich medium for integrating the two. Films provide learners with access to spontaneous language used in everyday conversations, social practices, and contextual cues often absent from textbooks (Weninger & Kiss, 2013; Pegrum, 2008). Unlike textbooks, which often present simplified or generalised depictions of culture, films provide authentic and dynamic portrayals of diverse cultural practices, values, and communication styles (Kramsch, 1993). By observing characters' interactions, gestures, and speech patterns, learners gain insights into cultural norms and values (Herrero, 2019). Chao (2013) showed that foreign films can stimulate critical intercultural reflection, allowing learners to observe cultural representations in ways that go beyond surface-level observations. Nevertheless, films may also reinforce stereotypes and dramatized images of cultures (Kuppens, 2010), suggesting the importance of structured guidance to foster critical viewing.

Empirical studies have highlighted the potential of films to foster intercultural awareness in EFL contexts. In the context of globalisation, intercultural awareness has become an essential component of language education. Language learning is not limited to the mastery of grammar and vocabulary; it also involves understanding the social and cultural contexts in which communication takes place. Intercultural awareness enables learners to navigate cross-cultural interactions, appreciate diversity, and avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural differences. Theoretical foundations such as Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence and Deardorff's (2006) process model emphasise the development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that allow individuals to interact effectively in multicultural environments. Liaw (2006) found that film-based activities helped learners both improve linguistic skills and develop insights into cultural values embedded in society. In addition to that, studies have shown that films enhance learners' ability to identify cultural differences and reflect critically on their own cultural assumptions (Pegrum, 2008; Liaw, 2006). Similarly, Borghetti (2011) and Porto (2014) observed that guided discussions and reflection tasks are essential for ensuring that film-based learning leads to intercultural competence rather than passive consumption. Recent research also supports the pedagogical value of films in fostering

intercultural awareness. Kartikasari, Retnaningdyah, and Mustofa (2019) found that Indonesian high school students developed multiple aspects of intercultural awareness, particularly *respect for others*, when films were integrated into EFL lessons through guided strategies such as pre- and post-viewing tasks and reflective journaling. Their study highlights that while films provide authentic cultural input, structured teacher mediation is essential to maximize their impact on learners' intercultural competence. Collectively, these findings indicate that while films are powerful tools for cultural learning, their effectiveness depends on pedagogical mediation.

## **2.2. Impact of Films on Cultural Competence and Language Learning**

Intercultural competence has been defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other cultural backgrounds. Byram (1997) identifies key components such as attitudes of openness, knowledge of social groups, and the ability to interpret and relate cultural perspectives. Fantini (2020) further highlights intercultural competence as a lifelong developmental process that involves empathy, flexibility, and critical cultural reflection. Within language learning, these skills play a central role, as learners are expected not only to understand linguistic forms but also to interpret the cultural meanings embedded within them. Recent research supports the pedagogical value of films in fostering intercultural awareness. Kartikasari et al. (2019) found that Indonesian high school students developed multiple aspects of intercultural awareness, particularly *respect for others*, when films were integrated into EFL lessons through guided strategies such as pre- and post-viewing tasks and reflective journaling. Their study highlights that while films provide authentic cultural input, structured teacher mediation is essential to maximize their impact on learners' intercultural competence.

Beyond their role in promoting intercultural awareness, films have long been recognized as powerful tools for language learning. They provide authentic input that allows learners to acquire vocabulary, grammar, and discourse patterns in meaningful contexts (Sherman, 2003). Unlike scripted textbook dialogues, films expose students to natural speech, colloquial expressions, and pragmatic features such as intonation and gesture, which are essential for developing communicative competence (Webb & Rodgers, 2009). Wang (2020) demonstrated that integrating Southeast Asian cultural themes into Taiwanese EFL classrooms enhanced both students' intercultural competence and language proficiency. His findings confirm that cultural resources in language lessons not only strengthen linguistic outcomes but also foster intercultural awareness when paired with reflective and experiential activities. Few studies have shown that films can enhance listening comprehension by training learners to process fast and varied speech patterns. For example, Bahrani and Sim (2012) found that exposure to films significantly improved learners' ability to understand spoken English in real-life situations. Films also encourage vocabulary acquisition: Webb and Rodgers (2009) demonstrated that repeated exposure to words in audiovisual materials helped learners adopt lexical items more effectively than through reading alone. In addition, films can boost learner motivation and engagement. Chen (2012) observed that students reported greater enthusiasm for language learning when lessons incorporated films, as the content felt relevant, entertaining, and accessible. Films also stimulate both the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning; they engage learners' emotions and sustain their interest by creating a comfortable, immersive learning environment that reduces anxiety and boosts motivation (Azarudeen et al., 2024).

Taken together, these findings suggest that films provide a dual benefit: they serve not only as cultural windows but also as linguistic resources, supporting the development of listening, vocabulary, and communicative competence in English as a Foreign or Second Language contexts.

## **2.3. Challenges and Limitations of Film-Based Learning**

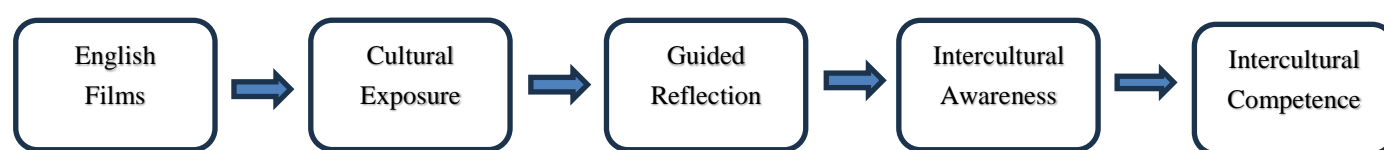
Despite their advantages, films also present challenges as a learning tool. Seferoğlu (2008) noted that fast-paced dialogues, idiomatic expressions, and accents can overwhelm language learners, limiting their ability to grasp cultural nuances. Baker (2015) emphasized that films may present oversimplified or distorted realities, which shape learners' perceptions in unintended ways which Dervin (2016) similarly warned that uncritical use of films could reinforce ethnocentric views rather than promote openness. These issues highlight the need for carefully designed pre- and post-viewing activities that promote critical cultural literacy.

Although prior research has established the educational value of films, gaps remain. Few studies have compared how different film genres—such as fiction versus documentaries—shape intercultural learning outcomes

(Herrero & Vanderschelden, 2019). Existing literature also leans heavily on student perceptions, with fewer studies incorporating measurable learning outcomes (Deardorff, 2006). The present study aims to bridge these gaps by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine how English films influence intercultural awareness. By integrating structured film analysis, guided reflection, and classroom discussions, the study seeks to identify best practices for maximizing the educational potential of films in intercultural learning contexts.

## **2.4. Theoretical Foundations of Intercultural Awareness**

Intercultural awareness is central to effective communication in a globalized world. Byram (1997) introduced the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), emphasizing that language learners must acquire not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural knowledge, skills, and critical awareness. His framework highlights five dimensions; attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness which remain influential in intercultural education. Similarly, Deardorff (2006) proposed a widely recognized model of intercultural competence that highlights openness, adaptability, and respect for diversity as key outcomes. Fantini (2020) further reconceptualized ICC from a global perspective, stressing the need for learners to develop flexibility in navigating multicultural contexts. Together, these frameworks provide the foundation for analysing how English films contribute to learners' intercultural development and competency.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework on Film-based Intercultural Learning**

As shown in Figure 1, this framework illustrates how English films provide authentic cultural exposure, which, when mediated through guided reflection and classroom discussion, promotes intercultural awareness and ultimately develops intercultural competence.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a quantitative design with descriptive elements, focusing on the use of English films to foster intercultural awareness among university-level ESL learners. A group of 94 undergraduate students was selected through purposive sampling, representing learners from diverse ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia. The students were selected because they were enrolled in an English subject (ELC231) at the university, which incorporates films as part of its assessments.

The materials consisted of 14 English films selected based on three criteria: (i) authenticity of cultural representation, (ii) suitability of language level, and (iii) relevance to intercultural themes. These films were integrated into classroom activities to provide exposure to cultural diversity and authentic language use. A questionnaire adapted from Syazliyat Ibrahim et.al (2022) study on intercultural awareness which was based on Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model was used to measure students' attitudes, knowledge, interpretive skills, and cultural awareness. The questionnaires were presented in a Google Form for respondents' convenience in answering the survey.

The procedure was carried out in three stages:

1. Pre-viewing – students were given a briefing and guiding questions to prepare them for the cultural themes of the films.
2. While-viewing – students watched the selected films, with lecturers providing clarifications on cultural references where necessary.
3. Post-viewing – students answered the questionnaire, wrote reflections, and took part in class discussions to share their views on cultural diversity.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in intercultural sensitivity. In addition, thematic analysis of students' reflections provided further insight into their perceptions of cultural learning. Ethical considerations were observed, with informed consent obtained and confidentiality assured.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1 Demographic Information**

		Age			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-20 years old	92	97.9	97.9	97.9
	21-23 years old	2	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	94	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 displays the demographic information of the participants. A total of 94 students participated in the study, consisting of 64 females (68.1%) and 30 males (31.9%), with the majority aged 18–20 years (97.9%). All of them are in their third semester of studies taking ELC231 as one of their courses of the semester.

##### 4.1 Intercultural Awareness through Films

**Table 2 Intercultural Awareness Responses (n=94)**

Items	Response	Frequency	Percent
Interest in learning about own and other cultures	Yes	94	100%
Importance of being aware of cultural differences	Yes	93	98.9%
Main causes of misunderstanding between cultures	“All of the above” (racism, prejudice, worldview, language)	37	39.4%
Tolerance/acceptance of cultural differences	Yes	94	100%
Level of acceptance	High	41	43.6% (41)
	Average	53	56.4% (53)

The findings reveal that English films strongly contribute to students' intercultural awareness. As shown in Table 2, all participants (100%) expressed interest in learning about their own and other cultures through films, and nearly all which are 93 students (98.9%) acknowledged the importance of being aware of cultural differences. This result shows that films provide an engaging platform that motivates learners to go beyond linguistic acquisition and into cultural exploration, aligning with Kramsch's (1993) notion that language learning cannot be separated from cultural context.

When asked about the main causes of misunderstanding across cultures, 37 of students (39.4%) selected “all of the above,” recognizing racism, prejudice, language, and differing worldviews as interlinked challenges. This response highlights students' awareness that intercultural miscommunication is multifaceted rather than stemming from a single source. This recognition among the participants echoes Deardorff's (2006) framework of intercultural competence, which emphasises both cognitive awareness and attitudinal openness as prerequisites for successful intercultural interaction.



Students also demonstrated strong openness toward cultural tolerance. Every respondent (100%) reported trying to accept cultural differences, with 41 students (43.6%) rating their acceptance level as “high” and 53 students (56.4%) as “average.” This finding indicates that while awareness of diversity is widespread, there is room for deeper engagement to move more learners from “average” to “high” acceptance. As Borghetti (2011) and Porto (2014) argue, intercultural awareness must be nurtured through guided reflection, critical questioning, and structured exposure to diverse perspectives to evolve into intercultural competence.

Taken together, these results suggest that films serve as an effective entry point for cultivating intercultural awareness. They not only stimulate motivation and interest but also prompt learners to recognise the complexity of cultural misunderstandings and the importance of tolerance. However, the majority of students rate themselves at “average” acceptance, which shows that film exposure alone may not be sufficient. To transform awareness into deeper intercultural sensitivity, active classroom mediation will be necessary (Herrero & Vanderschelden, 2019).

#### 4.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence in English Classroom

The classroom context played a central role in shaping students’ intercultural communicative competence. A strong majority (81.9%) of participants reported that their lecturers gave balanced attention to both language and culture, while only a minority perceived a greater focus on culture (10.6%) or language (7.4%). This balance indicates that lecturers are making intentional efforts to integrate cultural perspectives alongside linguistic instruction, an approach supported by Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes the interdependence of language and culture in fostering intercultural skills.

Cultural discussions were reported by nearly all students (95.7%), though the frequency was uneven: 62.8% said such discussions occurred “sometimes,” 29.8% “often,” and only 7.4% “rarely.” These results suggest that while intercultural elements are present, they are not yet embedded as a regular classroom practice. This resonates with Seferoğlu’s (2008) observation that cultural content, including films, is often underutilized unless consistently reinforced through structured reflection and dialogue. In this sense, the frequency and depth of classroom mediation remain key to maximizing the benefits of film-based learning.

**Table 3. Intercultural Difficulties Faced by Participants**

Intercultural difficulty	Frequency	Percentage
All of the above	46	45.70%
Language	35	34.80%
Prejudice	24	23.80%
Superiority/Inferiority	16	15.90%
None of the above	4	4.00%

Students also reported that English classes helped them overcome multiple intercultural difficulties. As shown in Table 3, nearly half 46 students (45.7%) selected “all of the above” (language barriers, prejudice, and superiority/inferiority dynamics), highlighting that classroom practices are addressing intercultural challenges on multiple fronts. A large majority affirmed that classroom activities helped them to respect others and their cultures, aligning with Deardorff’s (2006) assertion that respect and openness are foundational attitudes in intercultural competence development.

Film-based oral commentary assessments further reinforced intercultural learning. After the activity, 80.9% of students adopted the belief that “other cultures are equal though different,” while only 19.1% retained an ethnocentric view (“my culture is the best”). Moreover, 95.7% agreed that the assessment improved their communication skills across cultures. These findings suggest that structured, film-based activities can shift attitudes away from ethnocentrism toward cultural relativism, echoing Dervin’s (2016) call for critical cultural literacy to help learners recognize equality across cultures while avoiding oversimplified stereotypes.

Overall, these findings indicate that films, when integrated into classroom practices such as oral commentary assessments and guided discussions, significantly enhance students’ intercultural communicative competence.

However, the limited frequency of cultural discussions (“sometimes” for most students) underscores the need for more systematic incorporation of reflective and dialogic activities. As Borghetti (2011) argues, intercultural competence grows most effectively when cultural encounters are mediated through intentional scaffolding, not left to incidental exposure.

#### 4.4 Usefulness of Films as a Learning Tool

To address Research Question 3, students were asked how useful they considered English films for developing intercultural awareness compared to other media. Table 4 summarizes their responses.

**Table 4 Usefulness of Films as a Learning Tool**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Useful	74	78.7	78.7	78.7
	Very Useful	20	21.3	21.3	100.0
	Total	94	100.0	100.0	

As shown in Table 4, all 94 respondents rated films positively, with 74 students (78.7%) describing them as *useful* and 20 students (21.3%) as *very useful*. This consensus among participants highlights the strong perception of films as an effective medium for fostering intercultural awareness. Students also expressed high motivation to learn English through films and interest in exploring cultural diversity, which resonates with earlier research that emphasizes the engaging and immersive qualities of audiovisual media in language education (Kramsch, 1993; Pegrum, 2008; Liaw, 2006; Wang, 2019).

**Table 5 Students' level of accepting others and their cultures**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Average	53	56.4	56.4	56.4
	High	41	43.6	43.6	100.0
	Total	94	100.0	100.0	

At the same time, the findings point to some important challenges. As shown in Table 5, although all participants reported some degree of tolerance toward cultural differences, fewer than half (43.6%) rated themselves at a high level of acceptance. This suggests that while films promote openness, the development of intercultural competence is an ongoing process that requires structured pedagogical support such as guided reflection and classroom discussion (Deardorff, 2006; Borghetti, 2011; Porto, 2014).

**Table 6 Students' Attitude**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	My culture is the best ever	18	19.1	19.1	19.1
	The other cultures are equal to only different from mine	76	80.9	80.9	100.0
	Total	94	100.0	100.0	

Students also noted occasional difficulty in interpreting implicit cultural cues in films as shown in Table 6, confirming Baker's (2015) caution that dramatised portrayals risk misrepresentation. Nevertheless, the majority 80.9%

adopted the belief that “*other cultures are equal though different*,” while a smaller proportion, 19.1% retained more ethnocentric perspectives. This outcome aligns with Dervin’s (2016) argument that films can both challenge and reinforce cultural biases depending on how they are mediated.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that students widely perceive films as both useful and motivating for intercultural learning. However, their effectiveness depends not on the medium alone but on thoughtful pedagogical integration. Activities such as critical analysis, structured discussion, and reflective tasks are essential to ensure that films cultivate intercultural competence rather than inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study examined the role of English films in fostering intercultural awareness among university-level ESL learners. The findings revealed that students were highly motivated to learn through films, expressed strong interest in cultural diversity, and generally perceived films as a useful medium for developing intercultural competence. Film-based activities encouraged positive attitudes toward cultural equality and improved communication skills across cultures, supporting the view that audiovisual materials provide authentic and engaging contexts for intercultural learning (Kramsch, 1993; Wang, 2019).

However, the results also highlighted limitations. While all participants reported tolerance of cultural differences, many rated their acceptance at only an average level. A minority continued to hold ethnocentric perspectives, suggesting that films alone are insufficient for developing deep intercultural competence. Furthermore, cultural discussions in classrooms were often limited, indicating the need for more consistent and structured pedagogical support. From the findings, it suggests that structured activities such as pre-viewing tasks, while-viewing guidance, and post-viewing discussions are essential for maximising learning outcomes (Seferoğlu, 2008). Porto (2014) and Borghetti (2011) emphasise the role of guided reflection in encouraging students to critically analyse cultural portrayals and relate them to broader intercultural themes. Such pedagogical strategies help learners to move beyond passive viewing and engage in active meaning-making, which supports the development of intercultural competence.

While this study provides evidence of the potential of English films in fostering intercultural awareness, several areas warrant further exploration. First, future studies could adopt a comparative approach across different film genres—for instance, contrasting the impact of documentaries, dramas, and comedies on learners’ intercultural competence. Second, longitudinal research is needed to examine whether the intercultural skills developed through film-based activities are sustained over time and transferred to real-life intercultural interactions. Third, expanding the sample to include learners from different proficiency levels, institutions, or cultural backgrounds could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how films shape intercultural learning. Finally, mixed-method studies combining quantitative measures with in-depth interviews or focus groups would enrich insights into students’ perceptions and the challenges they encounter when engaging with intercultural content in films.

Overall, the study demonstrates that English films are an effective tool for promoting intercultural awareness, but their potential can only be fully realized when combined with guided reflection, critical discussion, and classroom activities. By adopting such approaches, language educators can enhance learners’ ability to interpret cultural representations critically, challenge stereotypes, and develop the skills necessary for meaningful intercultural communication.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to the participating students for their valuable time and insights, which made this study possible. Special thanks are also extended to the lecturers of the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perak Branch, for their continuous support and encouragement throughout the research process. The constructive feedback from colleagues and peers has also been instrumental in shaping and refining this paper. Finally, the authors are grateful to the institution for providing the academic environment and resources necessary to conduct this study.



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